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The Postsecular Marx

Abstract

The emergence of 'postsecularism' prompts a re-assessment of the question of Marxism -and-religion, following a long period of polarization then a later Twentieth-century phase of ambivalent reticence. But much hangs on whether postsecularism is taken to entail *anti*-secularism, and whether the latter, though a notable tendency in contemporary social theory, is convincing. The main thrust of this article is to counter two influential strands of theoretical anti-secularism, one drawing on postcolonialist themes, the other headed by Charles Taylor's now-classic work *A Secular Age*. My arguments help us to re-specify the atheism-secularism of Marx himself, and to identify current options. Singling out for critical note the postsecular positions of 'compatibilism' and 'theologism', the overall stance that guides the article is that of an expansive but firm intellectual secularism. The point is neither to deny the subjective importance of religion, nor to underestimate its (variable) societal functionality. Rather, I want to reaffirm an analytical, socio-naturalistic approach to what we understand by religion, and accordingly resist the moralistic, approving tone of many discussions of religion's 'revival'. More generally, the cultural, epistemic and imaginative resources of *science* seem to me central for social understanding and progressive politics alike, an emphasis that remains one of Marx's and Engels's enduring contributions to critical sociology.

Introduction: Cold War to postsecularism

Even today, the selection of writings by Marx and Engels *On Religion* serves as a one-stop shop. The Soviet Foreword of 1955 – which, remarkably, stayed in place into the 1980s – declared that the book provides the 'theoretical foundations of proletarian, Marxist atheism', demonstrating how Marxism is 'radically opposed to religion' (Marx and Engels 1957: 7-8). Around the time of its fifth English-language printing, Solzhenitsyn's famous 'Letter to the Soviet Leaders' identified the principal defect of the CPSU's dogmatic Marxism as 'ferocious hostility to religion' (Solzhenitsyn 1974: 44). In this, Solzhenitsyn was citing Sergei Bulgakov, whose 1907 essay *Karl Marx as a Religious Type* held militant atheism to be the 'central nerve of [Marx's] entire life-work', reflecting his lack of all sense of sympathy, tragedy, and gnoseological curiosity. Marx, Bulgakov lamented, practised only a sterile "god of the dead" sociology' (Bulgakov 1977: 53-4, 61). Liberal Western scholars in the 1950s and 1960s – Popper, Aron, Plamenatz, Acton, et al – reinforced that Twentieth Century epitome of 'Marxism and religion', turning back upon Marx his own pithy depictions of ideological

consciousness (as exemplified by religion): Marxism itself was argued to be blind faith, the illusion of the epoch, the opium of the intellectuals, the enemy of open enquiry.

In a subsequent phase, the scientificity of structuralist Marxism played off against Marxist humanism, moves that were closely shadowed in the corridors of 1970s critical sociology. Pluralistically-minded and setting up miscellaneous dialogues with Christianity, soft Marxists could still not agree on the admissibility and/or necessity of religion. Meanwhile, for Althusser, ideology in general turned out, paradoxically, to be 'eternal' rather than transient, being the necessary process through which all social subjects imagine their relationship to their real conditions of existence. And within Althusser's matrix, not only did religious consciousness constitute one continuing Instance of effective ideological 'interpellation', it formed its very paradigm, perhaps even its source: subjectivity was only fully 'hailed' (and thereby constituted) by the sovereign Subject, that psychic fount of imperative meaning, recognition and authority, aka God. Significant ambivalence followed. Was the critique of religion (as announced in Marx's 'Introduction' to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*) the very 'premise' of all social critique; or was this just the young Marx clearing his Hegelian throat, with barely an aftertaste of religion? Through the 1980s and 1990s, these issues were left hanging, religion being hardly mentioned, and getting no dedicated topic slot, in prominent collections marking the centenary of Marx's death (McLellan 1983, Matthews 1983, Ball and Farr 1984).

David McLellan's important 1987 book stood almost alone in providing continuity of focus. On board with the general shift taking place in the understanding of ideology, from 'false consciousness' to a more neutral sense of cultural identity formation, McLellan nonetheless endorsed the orthodox picture. Marx, McLellan concluded, consistently dismissed religion as the fantastical inversion in men's minds of their material conditions of existence, manipulated to serve ruling class interests. But by this time many neo-Marxists agreed that that seeking to explain the origin, doctrines, development, and appeal of religion exclusively or even mainly in terms of class formations, class interests, and socio-economic dynamics, was destined to fail.

That consensus does not mark the end of the road for Marxism qua critique (of religion), because Marxism's explanatory ambitions and polemical sting can be lessened without total loss of identity or significance. This involves re-positioning Marxism as part of, not opposed

to, a more general critical sociology. Within that amalgam Marxists can still legitimately bring out the respects in which religious beliefs and practices *do* legitimate class forces and socio-economic structures or skew our understanding of human problems and motivation. Moreover, it remains plausible to argue that Marx's and Engels's naturalistic-historicist outlook has greater traction as a philosophy of social science than the methodological guidelines of other classical and modern theorists who provide important insights into religion. In that light, we should read Marx's and Engels's atheism not as subjective hostility to religion but as a concomitant of their socially-embedded scientific realism. These adjustments enable a more appreciative stance towards the enduring personal and societal roles played by religion whilst maintaining a *secular* intellectual outlook. Central to the latter is the view that *scientific* endeavour is completely central to our collective understanding and future, and that although science does not refute religion as such, nor require its demeaning, there *are* significant epistemological disconnects between an explanatory approach to beliefs in society and the religious temperament, with regular political stand-offs over time in which religion is demonstrably the loser (see Gingras 2017). Culturally speaking, we might then suggest, sociology (with Marxism pluralistically incorporated) should be 'on the side of science' – albeit in postpositivist vein. This is a fairly minimal secular perspective, but it helps steer a clear path through the tangled terrain of Marxism-and-religion in the present *postsecular* climate.

Cogent objections to the conceptual imprecision and lack of empirical purchase of the term postsecularism can readily be lodged (eg Beckford 2012). And as with postmodernism, out of which postsecularism belatedly emerged as crucial, few authors who seem to fit the bill willingly accept the label. Even so, viewed heuristically as a spectrum of revisionist *questioning* rather than as claims about the condition of *society* or as a definite theoretical *position*, the discourse of the postsecular has usefully pushed a range of claims and attitudes to the forefront of attention: that the secular and the religious – specifically Christianity – are historically and conceptually intertwined; that religion and science are not completely antithetical; that secularization is a variable and reversible process; that the very idea of religion qua propositional belief is a Euro-Christian-secular construction; that the normative and explanatory, when it comes especially to religion, cannot easily be separated out; that the affective and motivational aspects of religion and spirituality are not going to

disappear (though they may change); that the secular-liberal distinction between public and private, with religion assigned to the latter, is undemocratic; that secular theories and projects can themselves be regarded as forms of political theology; that religion has lost none of its potency for societal transformation; and that religion, today, is generally a progressive social and personal force (as it was not in Marx's day).

Clearly, all this prompts a barrage of further queries, the most pressing of which, for our purposes, is whether *postsecular* exploration requires us to be *anti-secular(ist)* – and to that extent *pro-religion* (McLennan 2010a, 2010b). I therefore concentrate my discussion on two influential lines of anti-secular postsecularism before airing and appraising two interesting postsecular Marxist variants.

Anti-secular I – critique of Critique

As part of the stretching out of 'ideology' toward cultural subjectivity in general, a corresponding undermining of the very notion of critique gathered momentum, through authors such as Koselleck, Walzer, Latour, and Ranciere, aided by styles of thought including neo-vitalism and the culturalist sociology that sought to grasp social meanings 'in their own terms'. Across these strands, Critique was figured as a kind of policing operation: lived ideas and practices are brought before its bench to be judged according to the norms of epistemic legitimacy, relational exteriority, and socio-historical functionalism, all of which were increasingly regarded as meta-theoretically outmoded. Thus, Critique's negative hermeneutics of suspicion was announced, in Latour's catchphrase, to have 'run out of steam', prohibiting the sort of appreciative, close-up, piecemeal and happenstance evaluation that Theory now favoured.

A further probe then strikes: is Critique not also, and problematically, *secular*? In her framing of a significant co-authored book (Asad et al 2013) political theorist Wendy Brown shows how, under that question, postsecular and *postcolonial* priorities merge. The dominant 'conceits' motivating critique, Brown asserts, are those of the European Enlightenment: critique refers to autonomous reason's winnowing out of truth from mystification, its unveiling of error, carrying at its heart the sociological association of

irrationality with specific, regressive forms of social organization and belief. And it is *religious* phenomena and societies above all that are assumed to exemplify such backwardness. Other postcolonialists have said the same: whether exposited in terms of priestly manipulation of souls in immediately pre-modern Europe or envisioned through perennial Western perceptions of non-Western communal practices as weird, dangerous, or exotic, religion *ideal-typically* signals, for modernist sociology, a state of societal immaturity, opacity, and heteronomy. Far from being oppositional in character, then, ‘the Western academy is governed by the presumptive secularism of critique’, demanding a full counter-blast (Brown 2013: 2).

Marx gets targeted here because his development of critique exemplifies ‘the intensity with which critique...articulates itself as a secular project, and identifies itself with the dethroning of God’ (Brown 2013: 4-5). Brown reminds us that Marx went considerably beyond the Kantian notion of critique – identifying the *a priori* limits of intelligibility and validity – by claiming that cognitive antinomies have their ultimate source and solution in the nature of social reality itself. The task of the critique of religion, for Marx, was not merely atheistically to pronounce its falsity/fantasy status – the Young Hegelian ‘critical criticism’ had already done that. Rather, the moment of negation had to be sublated within a fuller dialectic of material and political transcendence. Marx was therefore culpable of an even stronger exclusionary secularism than straightforward atheism implied.

This reading of Marx seems manipulative. On the one hand, Brown acknowledges how, for him, atheism as a straight negation of God and theology came to seem misguided, too dependent on what was being denied. On the other hand, she conflates atheism and secularism to her own advantage by characterizing Marx’s emphasis on *social* emancipation from all forms of human alienation (including religion) as being ‘intensely’ about the ‘dethroning of God’. Yet, from the time of his 1843 ‘Introduction’, Marx was much *less* intense about the falsity of religion or the ‘truth’ of secularism. Moreover, *On the Jewish Question*, though a decidedly cryptic and somewhat puzzling work, established that Marx was not a *political* secularist in any obvious sense. Leaving aside overt Christian-pietist bias and routine censorship in the Prussian regime at the time, Marx reasoned that even the ideal secular state represented a quasi-religious ‘projection’, standing as the divinely appointed intermediary, just like Jesus, through which the spiritual democracy of virtuous

citizen souls will be accorded their God-given freedom. The distinction between state qua ideal democratic-representative politics and civil society as the sphere of wealth, property, competition and self-interest was merely a laicised version of the *theological* dualism of the heavenly and earthly realms; of transcendent spirit set against profane matter.

More generally, the critique of (secular) Critique involves a kind of performative contradiction. Critique's intellectual 'conceits' need to be unmasked because they reflect the deeper 'religious shape and content of Western public life and its imperial designs' (2013: 4). Yet this unmasking, even if to reverse effect, involves *exactly* the truth-assuming style and ideology-exposing procedure that is deemed to be thoroughly secularist and 'complicit' with the Eurocentric colonial project. A later Preface to *Is Critique Secular?* claims that the point of the original book was merely to 'challenge the presumption that critique is necessarily secular'. But given how heavily the original volume pushed to establish, as *definitive*, that very association, this looks like retrospective backtracking.

A further problem relates to Talal Asad's absorbing work on formations of religion and secularism (eg Asad 2003). One basic point Asad makes, repeated by many postsecularists, is that these terms hold only within the Western Christian tradition. Thus, the very idea of religion as something specifiable in relation to something like the secular, and moreover identifiable principally in terms of systems of *belief*, is a Euro-Christian invention, indeed a false and coercive universalization. Consequently, the proper approach for social understanding is to develop complex genealogies that avoid invoking sharp theoretical contrasts (like secular/religious) either as premises or conclusions, emphasising instead the radical *singularity* of embodied cultural practices, differential expressions of fealty, and modes of collectively experienced being. However, although set up as an overarching anthropological guideline, the radical particularity of cultural being and the bracketing out of ideational content are accorded *only* to non-Christian and non-Western formations, or to subaltern/deviant ones within the West. Christian, Western and secular formations are treated, contrariwise, as nothing but power-laden generalities serving functional interests. The internally-experienced 'truth' of the first type of cultural practices and values must be merely witnessed and respected, it seems, whereas any aspirations to intrinsic value in the latter type are to be coded as sham, merely self-legitimizing stories that Eurocentrics tell themselves in the process of committing systematic symbolic and real violence against

Others. Such a stilted application of critique virtually prohibits *any* ‘external’ criticism of non-Christian religious cultural politics, and yet, ironically, cannot itself be sustained without background reliance on some of the central value-references of cultural modernism (eg a better, more egalitarian humanity) and its analytical apparatuses (eg a complex, distancing anthropology, plus ideology-critique).

Anti-secular II – critique of subtractionism

The second strand of anti-secularist postsecularism derives from Charles Taylor’s (2007) grand narrative of the ‘secular age’, in the wake of which several volumes of mostly favourable commentary have flowed. Neither Taylor nor his supporters accept the term postsecularism, most likely because of its close association with Habermas, who is considered too secularist (Calhoun et al 2011: 18, Warner et al 2010: 22-3). Even so, *A Secular Age* inhabits many of the themes I listed earlier as typically postsecular, playing up, in particular, how secular-like surges ebbed and flowed *within and throughout* the Western Christian traditions, and how secularism and secularity are culture- and people-forming *social imaginaries*, redolent with power and thus absolutely not to be thought of as what is naturally/rationally left standing once religious beings and devotion to them are ‘shucked off’. For Taylor, the secular age means the pluralization of ultimate concerns, not (necessarily) the decline of religion and most definitely not its elimination. Indeed, contrary to secular materialism, Taylor sees ‘openings to transcendence’ even within the unbelieving ‘immanent frame’ as well as existing beyond that dominant frame’s reach.

One issue I have with the Taylorian paradigm that although the secular age is viewed rather positively overall, even with the immanent frame said to be dominant within it, a relentlessly negative account of ‘narrow’ secularism grounds the whole platform. Thus, in *A Secular Age* and across the overviewing commentaries, secularism is repeatedly skewered as both conceptually inadequate and ideologically vicious. If secularism has any upside at all – which we might imagine it has, in this secular age – it is hard to discern in this literature. In setting things up in this way – secularism framed, so to speak – *named* secularists and *detailed* argumentation are surprisingly scarce. Weber is often gesturally noted regarding the disenchanting condition of modernity, but no advocates of secularism are produced for

scrutiny, and no sense is given that any serious developments in philosophy and social theory could possibly have come from that quarter. Instead – through scores of pages – we are left to take it on trust that ‘many accounts of secularity treat the history of religion as the career of a mistake that can now be corrected’ (Warner et al 2010: 24); that ‘many secularization narratives presented religion as an illusory solution’, that ‘many accounts of secularization take the form of what Taylor has called “ subtraction stories”’ (Calhoun et al 2011: 11).

It is striking in that rhetorical context that the likes of Marx, Mill and Nietzsche are never properly engaged with, nor is it acknowledged that such secular thinkers were far from accepted in their time and have only partially been embraced ever since. Moreover, in the 800-odd pages of *A Secular Age*, Taylor squares up with only one contemporary scholar of secularization, Steve Bruce. During the tussle, Taylor concedes that Bruce is not in fact an ‘eliminationalist’ (of religion) at all; rather Bruce is a secularizationist, just as Taylor himself has to be some kind of secularizationist, otherwise his own storyline makes no sense. No wonder then that Taylor continues to puzzle over a query he had shared earlier with his readers: ‘So what beef do I have with (orthodox) secularization theory?’ (2007: 431). The answer seems to default to the suspicion that secularist eliminationism must be lurking *somewhere* in the tone of secularizationist texts or in devious handling of the data.

For all that, the anti-secularist refrain spreads, meme-like. Thus, in Ira Katznelson’s and Gareth Stedman Jones’s version, approvingly citing Taylor (2010: 1-4): ‘Until quite recently, a rather simple story prevailed...; a theory that ‘history has played a joke upon’; featuring ‘a universal transition...’ in ‘every society...’; to the effect that ‘religion originated in mankind’s fear of the unknown...’; and ‘supernatural belief’ is treated as ‘forms of superstition...’. We might pause here to wonder why treating supernatural beliefs as superstition is so intellectually scandalous, just as we might question how anti-secularists automatically treat religious claims and frames as *sui generis*. As it turns out, however, these authors do *not* after all wish to be so sweepingly dismissive. Despite appearances, they do not want to ‘replace unconvincing theory by a demonstration of empirical diversity’, or ‘abjure any and all notions of secularization’, or even ‘abandon the term and its questions’. What they do want to emphasise is that historically and politically there are *multiple secularities* (2010: 5). A fair point, but we should note that the editors of the *Oxford Handbook of Secularism*

regard 'polysecularity' not as counting against secularism, but as core to both its understanding *and advocacy* (Zuckerman and Shook 2017).

Wendy Brown's position on Marx, within the context of the Taylor debates, is more affirmative than it was in *Is Critique Secular?* Taking her distance from the Canadian philosopher's superficial treatment of historical materialism, Brown underlines passages across the range of Marx's writings that reveal a more complex sense of his relation to religion, and this time she also notes his relative detachment from secularism as keyed by atheism. Setting Marx's stance in the space between 'debunking religion...and casting it as an eternal human need', Brown now thinks that Marx makes 'the project of overcoming religion...much more difficult' than it was for Feuerbach (Brown 2010: 86, 91). Brown remains sympathetic with Taylor's claim that secularist 'subtraction stories' are hopelessly reductive of religious experiences and needs, but she seeks partially to exempt Marx from that charge.

For one thing, Marx's critique of religion is *historical*, not (primarily) ontological. Second, and reversing her earlier position, Marx's early thinking about the modern state shows the close intertwining of politics and Christianity, not his substantive secularism as such. Third, from the '1844 Manuscripts' through the *Communist Manifesto* and on to *Capital* itself, Marx re-directs the targets of the Feuerbachian 'inversion': instead of religion (alone) being the fantastic, inverted form of the human essence, leaving us alienated and constantly misrecognizing both reality and ourselves, it is (serially) the products of our labour, the power of money, the fetishism of commodities, and the ruling abstraction of exchange value that are grievously exteriorized and in effect deified. These materialized inversions of human capacities and creations are profoundly profaning, desacralizing forces and mechanisms; yet they too cast a profound spell and demand to be worshipped. In other words, Marx was not a doctrinal secularist after all, which is good news for those on the Left today who are 'deeply appreciative' of religion's 'power to inspire and incite' in the cause of progressive politics (2010: 83).

Brown's case for a postsecular Marx could be taken further. After all, in the 'Introduction', alongside the ostensibly dismissive 'opium' metaphor, we also get religion as heart of a heartless world, protest against suffering, and the luminous halo of the vale of tears. Other attractively knotty characterizations have it that religion provides the 'general theory' and

‘encyclopaedic compendium’ of our ‘reversed world’, its ‘moral sanction’ and ‘enthusiasm’, and its logic in popular form – all suggesting that Marx perfectly well realized that religion has significant cognitive, educative, and motivational status beyond the truth or otherwise of its manifest content. As for opium, in Victorian times that multi-form substance helped relieve all kinds of incapacitating conditions – as Marx knew personally – and was thought to stimulate deep reflection and creativity. Opium provided ways of *managing* the world, not escaping it.

The voicing of the celebrated opening to the ‘Introduction’ also needs attending to. ‘For Germany’, Marx announced, ‘the criticism of religion is in the main complete, and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism’. Translators and interpreters quibble over whether it should be ‘presupposition’ (or something else again) rather than ‘premise’, but the real hesitation lies in the *For Germany* clause. Is Marx speaking as fully part of this collective? Unlikely, given that he is trying to bring out German social backwardness in the piece. Marx identified closely, of course, with the critical project of *philosophy* and he thought German philosophy more advanced than English and French. Yet the passage takes the form not of propositional debate, but that of a lofty scenario or *tableau*. *For Germany*, today, this. And up to a point: all well and good. But now Philosophy is moving offstage, in a materialist and political direction, from the criticism of heaven to the criticism of earth. In this, arguably, Marx is taking *leave* of logical criticism in terms of premises and deductions, and with it any special interest in, or hostility to, religion.

Still, the postsecular Marx cannot be pushed too far. His historical and materialist approach *was* after all meant to represent a decisive advance on stand-alone philosophy as well as religion/theology. Brown thinks this counts against Marx, persuaded that Taylor’s subtractionism charge works and that the enduring human need for religion must be acknowledged, today taking a politically progressive form. But these additional points can be blunted. I have already indicated that the Taylorian dismissal of secularism amounts to a kind of counter-subtractionism. All too often, the dreary ploy is activated whereby secular unbelief equates to just so many ‘ways of denying transcendence’. The lack of sufficiently *sociological* reasoning in the Taylor line is also telling. Subtraction stories should be ditched, Taylor claims, because they do not conform to ‘our best phenomenology’. The presumption here is that there exists a collective, conscious ‘we’ that is the subject of historical

understanding and change, and that in the condition of modernity this 'we' experiences an awful, aching sense of emptiness. Thus, 'everyone understands' that there is a 'lack of thickness' in the culture, a deep *malaise* and flatness around the place, notwithstanding the availability of artistic and other non-utilitarian discourses (2007: 61, 307-10). It is as though Dickens's *Hard Times* said it all and still applies. However, what if 'our best phenomenology' runs a little too closely to Taylor's own impressionism and his personal spiritual commitments? What exactly is to count, for example, as evidence for 'our' utter sense of emptiness? Are we just to plunder the vast range of social problems and harms to fill out the one spiritual register of the modern(ist) 'malaise'? Are not the numbness and abasements routinely attributed to *secularism* better aligned with *consumerist capitalism*? And do we not need to look much more closely at differences of subjectivity and opportunity amongst classes, genders, cultures, historical epochs and civilizations before generalizing about collective lack and transcendence?

It is also debatable to designate whatever spiritual blight or bliss people feel in their lives as *religious*, exactly, and questionable to present the experiential 'thickness' that Taylor thinks essential to religion as always *desirable*. Numerous examples of super-intense subcultures across the range, religious and secular, would suggest otherwise. As for postsecular confidence about the progressiveness of religion today, this naïve and dangerous contention is continually rolled out with only 'good' cases in mind, cases whose progressiveness is in any case often bound up with the prospects of better secular-democratic outcomes.

On scientism

I have been staunching the flow of two major counter-secularist streams operating within the postsecular context. The impulse to present intellectual secularism as intrinsically nasty and devoid of analytical, ethical and spiritual depth seems to me mistaken, and the spontaneous nod of approval given to many aspects of 'the revival of religion' is ill-judged – none of which means that secular and religious people cannot work in progressive unison, be intimate with one another, share much else in common. I have also avoided categorizing Marx himself either as totally lacking in appreciation of religion, or as a postsecularist in

waiting. Rather, Marx is best regarded along the lines of a little-known study by Delos McKown (1975): that he is a significant contributor to the naturalistic and sociological understanding of religion. Marx's personal views were indeed at times bilious, McKown accepted, and his chosen socio-historical apparatus could not possibly catch, far less put paid to, the remarkable plasticity through which religions manage to adapt to evolutionary pressures and changing social circumstances, morphing significantly in the process. But the part of Marx that took an explanatory, analytical approach to theorising religion, plus his instinct to root out the hypocrisy and moralising done in its name, were greatly to his credit. Since this verdict on Marx's contribution is evidently mixed, I would add that in modern sociology Marxism has been instrumental in criticising the pitfalls of the kind of full-scale functionalism and evolutionism that McKown himself, coming from a 1960s American sociological formation, got close to endorsing. And in a more original way than McKown allows, Marx incorporated as an intrinsic level of a new style of complex naturalism the shaping influence of socio-economic systems and sociological variables on human behaviour and belief.

Let me underline the importance of rightly interpreting that philosophical contribution by reference to Gareth Stedman Jones's major biography of Marx. We noted earlier that Stedman Jones gave qualified support to current anti-secularist thinking, and the same blend is at work in *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, where the stress falls more on the second than the first of those terms in the subtitle. Thus, the historian confirms Marx's consistent put-down of religion as a 'defect' in modern existence and relates this conviction to a double-sided cultural bias in Marx: his inveterate *classicism* (Greek art and thought were *not* religious, Marx held), and his correspondingly *Orientalist* view of religion as a cognitively stunted syndrome with origins in the fetishistic primitive cultures of the East. Marx's early championing of the 'rational state' and the mission of 'philosophy' were marked by these prejudices, and his critique of religion, as a result, was less rigorous and effective than that of the unfairly castigated Bruno Bauer (2016: 94). When Marx turned his vehement attention to the observationally astute Max Stirner, Stedman Jones continues, his critique was both elephantine and inaccurate. In fact, stung by being placed by Stirner in the Feuerbachian religious 'cult' of Man, Marx quickly contrived a decisive empirical turn of his own. This demotion of Marx is not intrinsically anti-secularist. Indeed, the core objections

are liberal-secular, with particular attention being drawn to Marx's 'rigid and impoverished' attitude to political representationalism in modernity.

Stedman Jones's rigorously contextualist treatment of Marx is salutary (see Carver 2018 for a more sympathetic situating). Yet it feels like the stick is being bent too far in the other direction, and it is dubious whether the real historical Marx (or anyone else) can be fully recovered outside the politics and theory of the present. In other words, Stedman Jones's study is also an *intervention*, and his identification of Engels as the main culprit in establishing scientistic Marxism is pivotal to it. In this, unfortunately, Stedman Jones seems merely to reproduce the polar terms of the Cold War epitome. We can agree that in orthodox 'Diamat' essential aspects of the Hegelian tradition that Marx never abandoned were suppressed, especially the status and role of conscious agency. Also, that Marx sought to *synthesize* materialism and idealism, not to assert the absolute primacy of the former (Stedman Jones 2016: 193). However, Marx's own definite naturalism, albeit of a complex, integrated sort (see Wood 1981), went considerably beyond Hegelian idealism, however construed. Late in life, Marx was nearly as absorbed as Engels in hoovering up the latest scientific and mathematical findings and paradigms. A much more nuanced reading of Engels is also possible. Not only seriously up to speed in his tracking of scientific discovery, Engels was also better attuned than Marx to the history, functions and attractions of religion. His intention was not hatefully to trump religion, but to place it in scientific context, and to figure out how best to relate Marxism itself to the remarkable progress of substantive knowledge in his day. *Anti-Duhring* especially can be read as conducting a critique *both* of continuing religious intellectual authority *and* of excessively scientistic naturalism. With that twofold purpose in mind, Engels was consistently critical of unfounded *teleology* (Benton 1996); held an essentially *fallibilist* conception of science, ahead of Popper (O'Neill 1996); and his materialism was palpably, if not consistently, *non-reductionist* (Sayers 1996). We can further point to Engels's postpositivist emphasis on the intrinsic *revisability and historicity* of science itself and all its laws/objects, and to his relegation of metaphysics (including metaphysical materialism). No philosophy, Engels stated, can capture once and for all 'the great totality of things and of our knowledge of things' (Engels 1959: 40).

Now it might be argued that Engels's style of realism in such statements is more like empirical realism – perhaps even empiricist realism – than the kind of ontological critical realism developed by radical philosophers like Roy Bhaskar in the 1970s and 1980s. But in retrospect Engels may have the edge here, because critical realism's prioritizing of ontology over epistemology now looks excessive (McLennan 2009). Ontological reason, by way of its transcendental arguments setting out the conditions of all and any science, leads to the rather bizarre idea that critical realists can inform scientists about what it is that they are really investigating, how truly 'deep' their penetration goes, and how progressive it is. The fact is, however, that no serious philosopher allows their views about ontological fundamentals to run against the drift of whatever advanced science seems to tell us. In Engels's terms, philosophical ontology cannot be 'a special science' holding jurisdiction over the synthetic findings of empirical knowledge (1959: 40).

Construed thus, Engels provides a good corrective to the drift into the extravagantly speculative mode of the later Bhaskar and others, playing up the need to be 'realist about God', to access the Ultimatum, and to open up the 'cosmic envelope' that somehow constitutes and contains everything. (For a postsecular 'warming up' of Marxism's own religious affinities with one foot in this genre, see Agar 2014.) Charles Taylor's counter-secularism is not of that sort, but in a key section of *A Secular Age*, he too courts a certain kind of obscurantism. The evidential standards of modern science, Taylor suggests, represent 'closed world structures' and 'cramped horizons', designed for little more than to 'screen out the super-sensible' (2007: 556-70). Somewhat alarmingly, these one-dimensional propositions are unhesitatingly reproduced by prominent sociological allies. Thus, Jose Casanova (2011: 55) regards its unthinking 'epistemic knowledge regime' as central to what is unacceptably ideological about secularism, and Craig Calhoun casts even the limited aspirations to objectivity within social science as the legitimating 'rhetoric' of a 'secular orientation' (Calhoun et al 2011: 5), part of a 'deeply secular project' that has both under-appreciated religion and held on to 'the secularization narrative longer than dispassionate weighing of the evidence might have suggested' (Calhoun 2012: 350-51). However, the debilitating paradox I identified in Anti-secularism I patently applies here too: either the counter-secularists are *also* ideological secularists in precisely the sense in

question, seeing as they too aspire to 'dispassionate' epistemic gain; *or else* their contentions have force only as unthinking biases of a different kind.

Compatibilism, theologism

My response to anti-secularism helps illuminate other postsecular options on Marx and Marxism. One of these I call 'compatibilism' – the idea that Marxism (still) gives us the best analysis of capitalism and its discontents, plus some historical grounds for social hope, but that it is religion that (still) more directly and independently deals with life's big issues and the angst of subjective commitment. Terry Eagleton is perhaps the major compatibilist today, unhesitatingly telling us both *Why Marx was Right* (2011), but also that Marx was simply not in the business of constructing the kind of 'theory of everything' that covered vital matters of love, death and the meaning of life (or even the future). It follows that Marx would not be concerned, nor would he stand refuted, if many of our deepest thoughts and hopes were still to be sourced from religion. This option has its attractions. After all, as noted, attempts to elevate dialectical and historical materialism into a fully comprehensive, scientific philosophy of life were disastrous, and even the 1970s principle of the 'relative autonomy' of ideologies and cultures must be pursued very flexibly. Plenty room, then, for appreciating the multiple rationales and effects of religion – along with those of art, love, sport, knowledge, and much else.

But those withdrawals from 'cosmic' Marxism and sociological reductionism still operate *within* the secular, immanent frame: appreciation of the value of religion does not entail *being* religious or thinking that religion is either an intrinsic human good or a distinct and constant phenomenon. Moreover, intense cognitive dissonance always threatens to disrupt the balancing acts that compatibilism requires. For example, while Eagleton is characteristically evasive about the actual existence of God, he cannot bear Him being regarded as having only *metaphorical* significance – a lily-livered academicist cop-out, in Eagleton's view. But this then runs directly counter to Marx and Marxism's undeniable atheism, even if we do not wish to make too much of that. In any case, despite Eagleton's apparent willingness to give the secular analysis of social life its own relative autonomy (since it includes Marx, who was right), he routinely weighs in against the presumed

bourgeois lifelessness of secularity and secularism in a manner that prompts a straightforward re-play of our earlier discussions. Thus, in *Culture and the Death of God* (2014), Eagleton sweeps through modernist thought since the Enlightenment, occasionally conceding that its paradigms have their own logic and purpose. Ultimately, though, they are to be seen chiefly as ‘viceroys for God’ and ‘counterfeit theologies’. By the same token – and with no serious consideration of counter-arguments – Eagleton pronounces that *only* (Christian) religion can do justice ‘to the symbolic and affective dimensions of social existence’; can properly deploy ‘the resources of image, ritual and narrative’; and can fulfil both emotional commitment and ‘solidarity with the powerless’ (2014: 69, 161, 191, 208). With those *a priori*s, any genuine compatibilism simply breaks down.

A second postsecular option can be labelled ‘theologism’ and is best represented by Roland Boer’s impressive series of books analysing how Marx and around thirty other leading Marxists have dealt with or carried the trace of religion and theology (Boer 2005-14). Thus, in the case of Marx – to stick only with the founder himself (Boer 2012) – Boer systematically prowls through the work to show how heavily laden it is with phrases, tropes, and ironic parallels, derived and delivered in spontaneous fashion from the Bible and other religious/theological sources. Particular stress is placed on the pervasive recurrence in Marx of the ‘Feuerbachian inversions’ that we noted earlier as operating at the core of Marx’s thought from his youthful atheism through to the later critique of abstraction and fetishism. It is fatal, Boer warns, to think of these forms and mechanisms as merely illusory or superstructural, since their embeddedness and effects are entirely material and real. The core logic of capital, we should then say without embarrassment, is *theological*; that is how capitalism actually works.

Equally, Boer thinks it appropriate to regard Marx’s theoretical *exposure* of capital and its mechanisms, together with moves towards any practical emancipation from them, as also theological in character, being a materialist variant of the (theological) critique of idolatry. Boer repeats many times that he is *not* seeking to show that atheistic Marxists are religious at heart or that Marxism is merely secularized theology. Rather, Marxist thinkers have produced an extensive archive of *engagement* with theology. To further ease anxiety, Boer believes that (Christian) theology is radically and necessarily conflicted, that it can be practised by atheists, that it is not reducible to reflection and deliberation on God, and that

its core concepts (faith, love, suffering, redemption, etc), are essentially contestable. If Marxism should recognize its theological bearings and ambitions, theology for its part must fully *internalise* a strong materialist, Marxist perspective on ideology and emancipation.

Boer's theologism lends further plausibility to two important postsecular considerations that anti-secularism crowds out. One is that by no means everything in the way of spirituality, speculative metaphysics, mythologizing, utopian leanings, and existential meaning-seeking – all pushing beyond the hold of direct empirical determination – is well designated as *religion*. Indeed, analytically, and taking the long view, the categorial hierarchy might better be reversed: religions as we have known them, whilst unquestionably important, provide just some of the ways that humans in their naturally and socially confined circumstances, and societies in their patterns of consolidation and disintegration, have dealt in spirituality, metaphysics, myths and meaning. Second, Boer's dead-pan manner plays down how controversial the thought is that discourse about God and the divine is but an optional sector of theological reflection. Boer rationalises this by pointing out that meta-theology (including auto-critique) has always been its most engrossing part. But he operates this level in the manner of philosophical enquiry and interdisciplinary cultural criticism.

So this theologism, if it is indeed a 'recovery' of the religious dimension of Marxism, is an intriguing and complex variety. For example, it does not offer much support to postsecular anti-secularism. Marx and Marxism, Boer argues (2014: 324-30) are *simultaneously* secular and anti-secular. Yes, their fundamental analysis of capitalism and class, and their projections of universal human betterment entail restless, dissatisfied dwelling in the secular present. But the aspiration to transcendence remains thoroughly this-worldly.

For all Boer's detailed scholarship and critical merit, it is still theology *rather than* Marxism that ends up as the dominant partner in the relationship. This overarching preference seems puzzling at one level, given Boer's many attempts to convince us that this is *not* what is going on. Yet, at the close of the series the most important aspect of transcendence that Boer settles on is pacification of the eternal *horror of death*, something that future humans could surely be imagined becoming calmer about. Also, right across his investigations the (acknowledged) Lutheran residue in Boer gives priority to *grace* – whether specifically God's or somehow schemed materialistically – as the force or category governing both religious

fate and radical political agency. Yet this essentially arbitrary gift and disposition cannot be explicated, only summoned, its nature and logic of applicability stretching beyond any merely human remit, suggesting a more powerful background dispensation of design and judgement. In mitigation, Boer recasts grace with reference to Alain Badiou's (atheist) politics and metaphysics, but this move only compounds the difficulty, seeing as Badiou's philosophy of Truth and Event is strongly anti-contextualist, and his ontology thoroughly Platonistic. On both counts, historical materialism, whether as historically understood or recast in postpositivist and sociological fashion, is left in the lurch.

Conclusion

In this article, I have been examining how Marx's and Marxism's approaches to religion can usefully be re-considered in the light of current postsecular questioning of the relationship between religious belief and atheistic unbelief, both over time and in the present. It should be clear from my analysis that postsecular thinking, whilst stimulating, is not to be regarded as a systematic or coherent theoretical perspective as such, not least because very different inclinations jostle within its spectrum. Two prominent variants of postsecular *anti*-secular(ist) thought were identified and evaluated, one being the postcolonially-inspired critique of secular Critique, the other being the Taylorian account of the dance of immanence and transcendence in the coming of the secular age. These attempts to counter secularism were shown not only to involve significant caricature, but also to be caught in a serious logical trap: the critique of unacceptable secularist ideology entirely relies upon versions of the conceptual strategies, 'rhetoric' and 'conceits' that are attributed (only) to secularism itself. Relatedly, both strands approach the nature of religion today in an overly *normative* way, and, within that normativity, are carelessly approving of religion's presumed progressiveness. In that context, critical sociology needs to retain a somewhat detached view of its essential concerns, even if shallow accusations of 'positivism' – whether as part of its 'secularism' or not – are bound to follow.

As for Marxism, Marx himself remains one of the least pliable figures in terms of postsecular thematics, but scope was found for a more appreciative view of religion on his part than convention dictates. We also saw that secularism and atheism should not be conflated, and

that the relationship between *intellectual* secularism and *political* secularism remains complex and ongoing. Overall, Marx's and Engels's atheism and (intellectual) secularism are best taken as aspects and consequences of their scientific realism, where – as prompted by a rather generous reading of the later Engels – that philosophical orientation should *not* be over-ontologised, and *should* be given a postpositivist spin, science being a matter of constantly revisable, historically changing principles, objects, and domains of enquiry. None of this entails that science directly refutes or conflicts with religious belief in a general sense, thus levering out some space for neo-Marxist re-engagement with religion and theology. Nevertheless, Marx and Engels were committed to the cultural centrality of science for society, politics and personality alike, and this neglected dimension of their secular outlook does generate definite epistemological and ethical tensions with religious worldviews, spelling trouble even for the kind of critical 'compatibilism' and 'theologism' that I pulled out for discussion.

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